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Response to Shapiro and Sober: “Epiphenomenalism -- the Do’s and the Don’ts”
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Shapiro and Sober argue that Jaegwon Kim’s Problem of Causal Exclusion makes a conceptual error insofar as it is based upon a conceptual impossibility. They argue that if one accepts a manipulationist account of causation, the problem of causal exclusion will be undermined by this impossibility. Under this manipulationist account of causation, the proper way to test for the causal efficacy of a property is to hold other causal factors fixed while manipulating the potential causal factor in question. If this produces a corresponding change in the effect, then one is justified in positing the potential cause as a genuine cause of the effect. In terms of the causal exclusion problem, to determine whether a mental property is in fact a cause of some effect, one must first hold fixed other potential causes, such as the microsupervenience base of the mental property, while manipulating the mental property; all while attempting to detect a change in the effect. This is the conceptual impossibility, Shapiro and Sober claim. Given a supervenience relation between a mental property and its microsupervenience base, the fixing of the supervenience base would necessary fix the mental property associated with that base. It would be conceptually impossible to hold fixed the one while manipulating the other.

My primary objection to this line of reasoning by Shapiro and Sober is that they have mistaken a practical problem about what we are able to manipulate for a deep truth about the nature of causation. This is, of course, tied up with their demand for an empirical approach to causation, but nonetheless this move allows one to skirt around the causal exclusion problem rather than engage it directly. A philosopher is well within his rights, so to speak, to hold out for a deeper explanation of an inexplicable phenomenon. This is something that an empirical approach to causation disallows; for by simply equating causation with manipulation, any deeper, more metaphysical, account of causation becomes conceptually impossible. An analogous situation might be the debate between proponents of the standard model of quantum mechanics and the hidden-variable model of quantum mechanics. Proponents of the hidden-variable model hold out for the presence of determining factors that would in principle explain the probabilistic nature of quantum phenomena. In other words, they refuse to take the results at face value, especially when the standard results are so conceptually counterintuitive. While the data do not speak for themselves to settle the issue of which model is correct, the proponents of the hidden-variable model are not

irrational to hold out for this deeper explanation.

I believe the same may be true in Shapiro's and Sober's account of causation. Their claim is plausible that the only method we have for detecting causal relationships is by means of manipulation. But this does not ipso facto rule out the possibility of causal relationships that are undetectable, even in principle (just as hidden-variables in quantum mechanics might very well turn out to be undetectable in principle). Shapiro and Sober appeal frequently to their approach's compatibility with the scientific method, but I would reply that a crucial feature of sound scientific method is to seek for a deeper cause underlying inexplicable phenomena. A typical example might be the failure of Newtonian physics to explain phenomena like electromagnetism and the search for a more basic, deeper explanation. Or perhaps even better might be the persistent search for a Grand Unified Theory of elementary particle physics, an attempt to unify phenomena that have seemed to be different in principle. Sound science has often searched for deeper explanations than have previously been conceptualized. This is the reason that the hidden-variable model remains rational, despite what might look prima facie to be evidence to the contrary. Likewise, relying on the pragmatics of causation, such as manipulation and intervention, out of practical necessity, should not be mistaken to be the paradigm of approaches to philosophical questions. Shapiro and Sober fault Kim and other epiphenomenalists for taking causation outside its proper domain of empirical science and putting it into the sphere of metaphysics. But the search for a deeper explanation than what appears to be warranted by the current data is itself a scientific enterprise, if one takes the history of science as the benchmark for what counts as scientific.